



The Elements of Virtue

PHIL 210, class 12

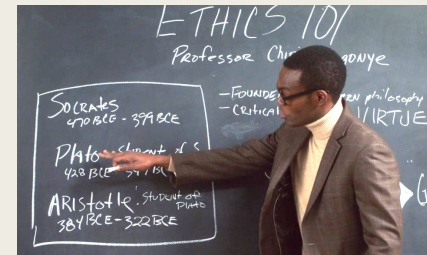


OVERVIEW

- Recap
- How do we become virtuous?
- Aristotle's "particularist" approach to ethics
- Role of pleasure in human happiness
- Role of friendship in human happiness
- Challenges for Aristotle's view

Recap: Happiness as the Final End

good life / final end / *eudaimonia*



needs to be inclusive and informative

Recap: Happiness as *Eudaimonia*

feeling happy vs. being happy



feeling happy
eudaimonia



eudaimonia
~~feeling happy~~

Recap: Happiness as *Eudaimonia*

feeling happy vs. being happy



feeling happy
eudaimonia



eudaimonia ✓
feeling happy ✓

} the good life
for Aristotle

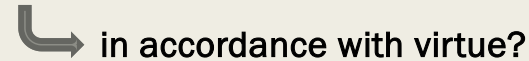
Recap: Reason and Virtue

Aristotle's account of happiness (*eudaimonia*):

rational activity performed well



- connected with our status as political animals
 - animals whose lives, beliefs, and values are informed by our activities in societies
 - animals who engage with one another in shared pursuits and commitments
 - animals whose social activity is shaped by the roles we take on in our lives



- “Virtues are social skills. To possess a virtue is to have extended and refined one’s abilities to perceive morally relevant information so that one is fully responsive to the local sociomoral context.”

(Haidt and Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008)



Name a role that you identify with

Start the presentation to see live content. For screen share software, share the entire screen. Get help at pollev.com/app

Virtues: Ancient and Modern

acceptance
courage
flexibility
forgiveness
generosity
gratitude
honesty
humility
integrity
justice

kindness
loyalty
moderation/self-control
patience
reliability
resilience
respect
responsibility
trust
wit/humor

The Fragility of the Good Life

“All the same, it [happiness = *eudaimonia*] apparently needs external goods to be added, as we said, since it is impossible or not easy to do fine things without resources. For just as we perform many actions by means of instruments, we perform many by means of friends, wealth, and political power” (NE I.8 1099a–b).

- We need “external goods” (e.g., friends, wealth, political power) to live well
- But the pursuit of virtue still has priority over the pursuit of all external goods
 - if you don’t use external goods well, you’ll won’t live well
 - goal is to treat friends justly, use wealth moderately, employ political rights wisely



The Need for Politics

- Need for good political leaders/laws/institutions
- Living a good life depends on living in a good society
- Self-work and sociopolitical work go hand in hand

“So since our predecessors have left the subject of legislation unexamined, it is presumably better if we ourselves investigate it and indeed constitutions generally, so that as far as possible our philosophy of human affairs may be brought to completion” (NE X.9, 1181b).



Socrates, Plato, Aristotle on Virtue



Socrates' view: we all desire what's good for us

- virtue's a kind of knowledge (of what's good for us)



Plato's view: we can know what's good for us and still be conflicted

- virtue requires shaping one's desires
- but this is still primarily an intellectual process (requiring dialogue, etc.)



Aristotle's view: more like Plato's but with greater emphasis on action

- virtue as a state of character that's trained
- requires habituation


Aristotle on the Human Soul

rational

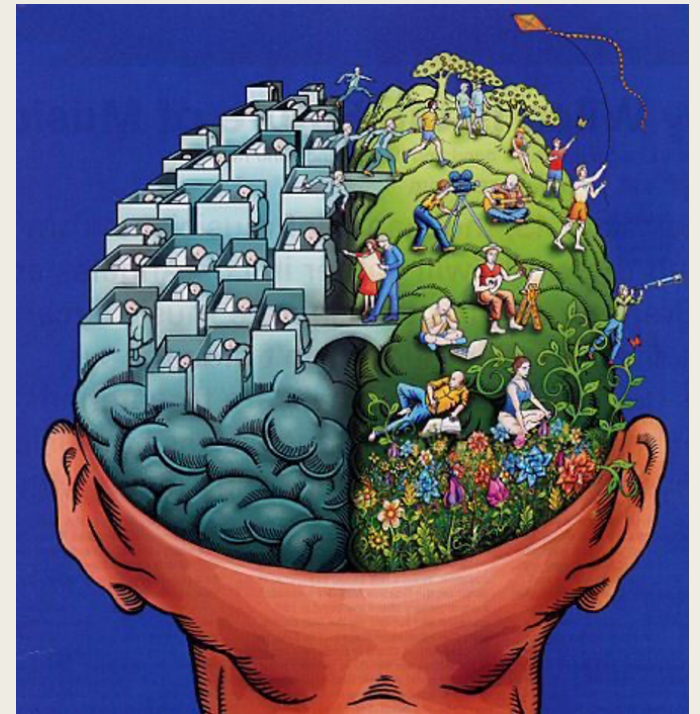
appetitive (subrational)

vegetative (nonrational)

} virtuous activity



“Another natural constituent of the soul, however, also seems to be nonrational, although it shares in reason in a way. ... Apparently, then, the nonrational part is also twofold, since the vegetative part does not share in reason in any way but the appetitive part (indeed, the desiring part as a whole) does so in some way, because it is able to listen to reason and obey it” (NE I.13)



How to be Virtuous

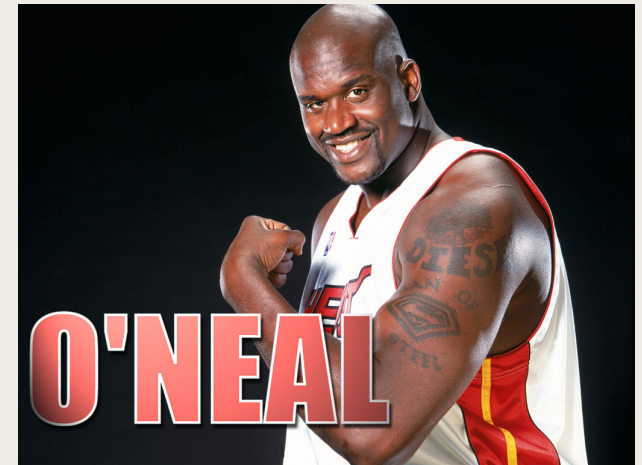
- Virtue's acquired through practice, like a craft
- Needs to be turned into a sort of habit, arising from a stable state of character

“Hence the virtues come about in us neither by nature nor against nature, rather we are naturally receptive of them and are brought to completion through habit” (NE II.1; cf. Mengzi vs. Xunzi).

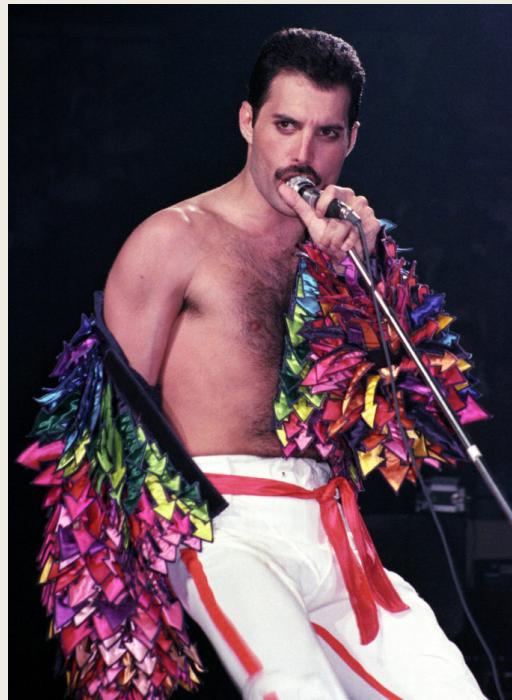
- Virtuous person is disposed to act in the proper way to the various situations they encounter by avoiding excess and deficiency in their actions and in their feelings (NE II.2)
- And not at isolated moments, but in a complete life

“I’d like to be known as ‘the Big Aristotle.’ It was Aristotle who said excellence is not a singular act, but a habit.”

– Shaquille O’Neal

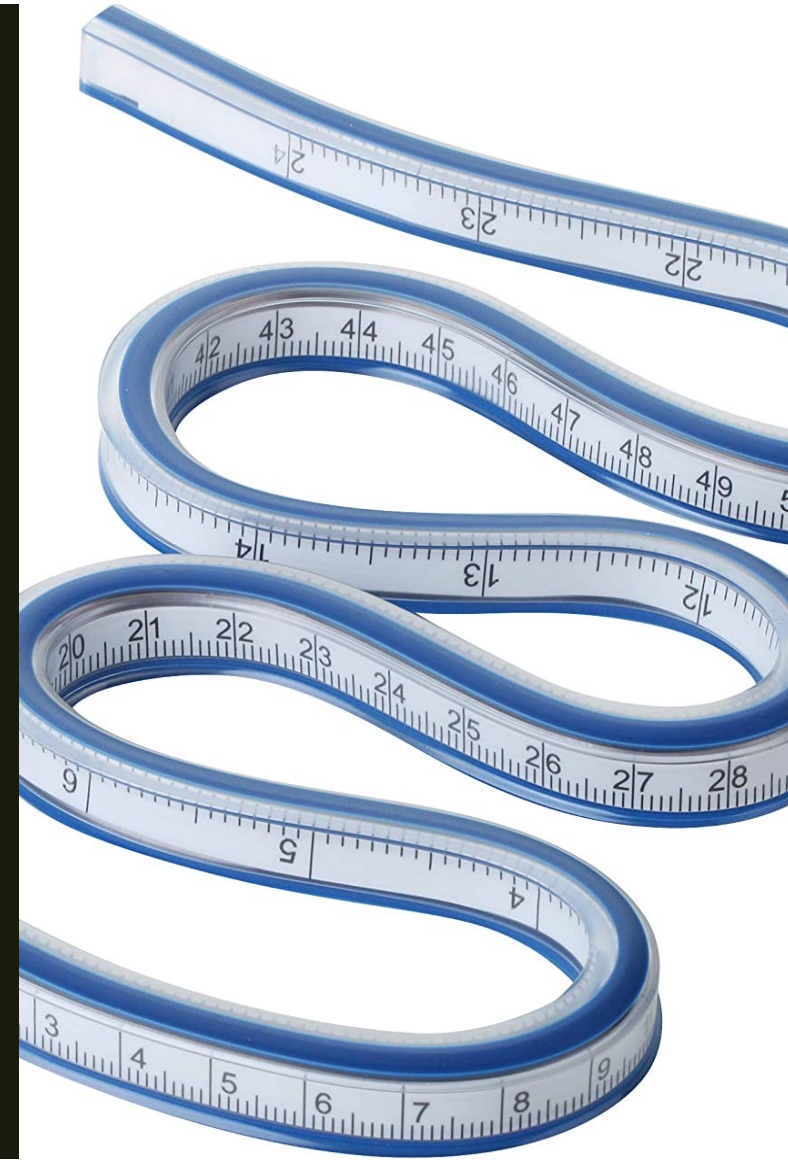


“Practice Makes Perfect”



The Imprecision of Ethics

- Ethics isn't concerned with prescribing universal rules or principles (*NE* II.2)
- Each situation calls for a particular response: we need a flexible ruler (*NE* V.10)
- So the virtuous person must be sensitive to various contexts and circumstances
- Requires a certain perceptual capacity to discern the proportionate response
- Worries
 - Too imprecise?
 - What's the test of virtuous action?





Criteria for Virtuous Action

1. Pleasure (*NE* II.3)
2. Doctrine of the mean (*NE* II.6)
3. Voluntary action (*NE* III.1–2)

Importance of Pleasure and Pain



- A virtuous person should like acting virtuously: actions aren't enough
- "Virtue of character is concerned with pleasures and pains" (*NE* II.3 1104b)
- Is this a hedonistic approach to ethics?
 - No: one test of a formed habit of virtue is whether you take pleasure in acting virtuously
- Recall Aristotle's view of the soul
 - We can train our desires so that we take pleasure in acting virtuously

“Practice Makes Perfect”

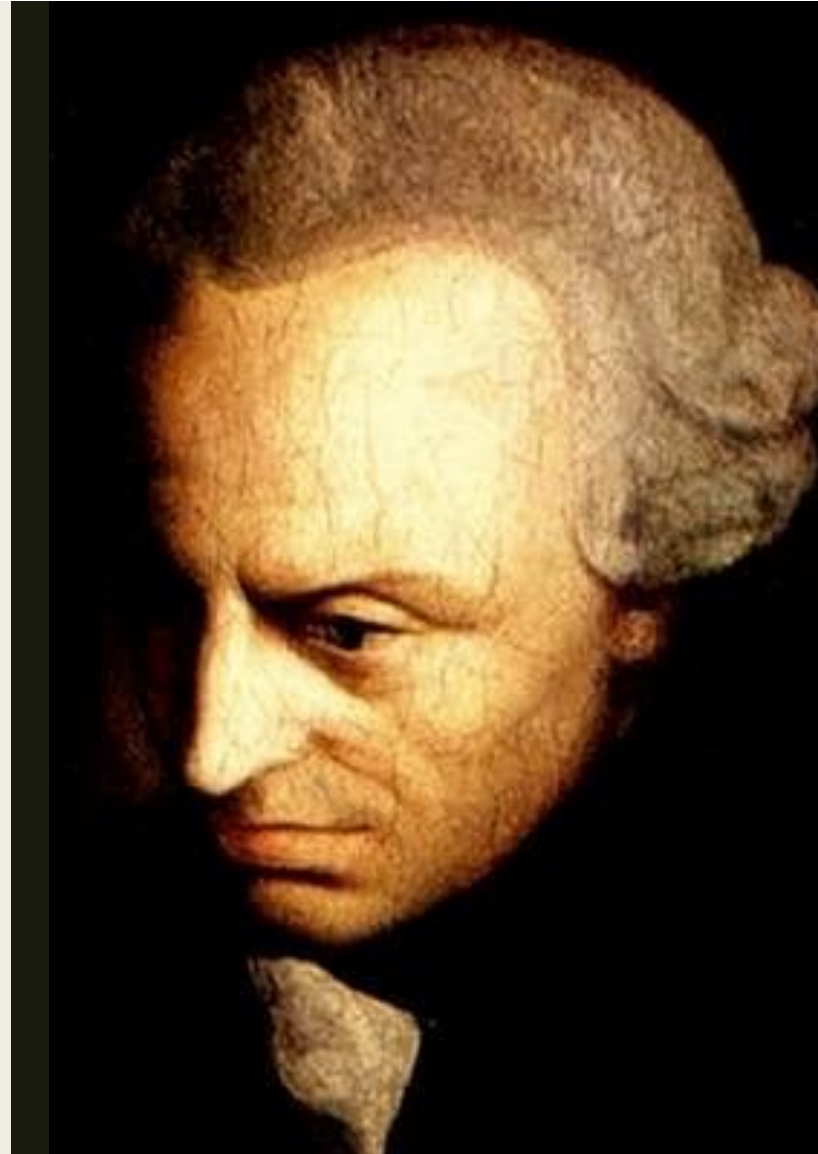


Compare with Kant

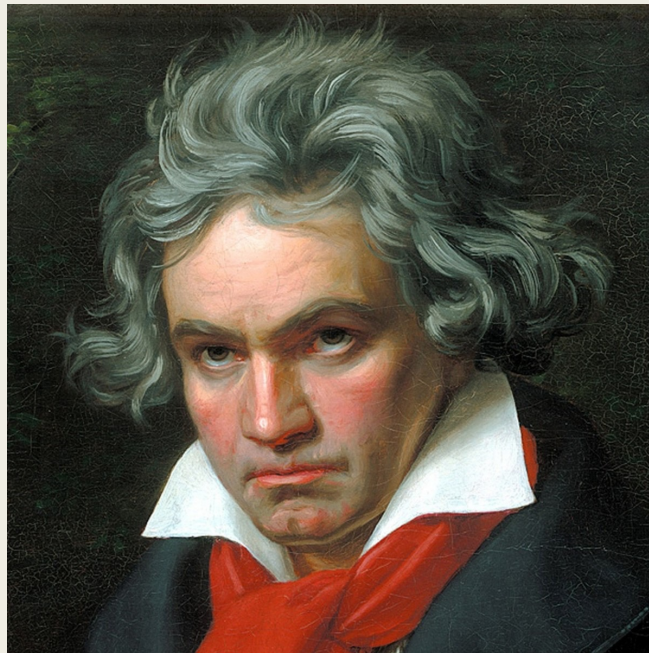
“To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take pleasure in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. ... [But] if nature had put little sympathy in the heart of this or that man; if (in other respects an honest man) he is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because he himself is provided with the special gift of patience and endurance toward his own sufferings and presupposes the same in every other or even requires it; if nature had not properly fashioned such a man for a philanthropist, would he still not find within himself a source from which to give himself a far higher worth than what a mere good-natured temperament might have? By all means! It is just then that the worth of character comes out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty.”

– Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:398-399

this sounds
like Kant!



“Practice Makes Perfect”



When poll is active, respond at **PollEv.com/tirani111**

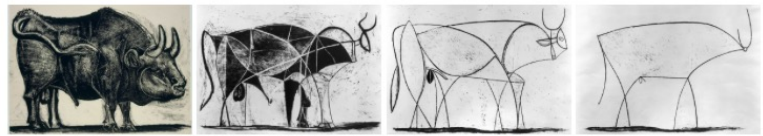
Text **TIRANI111** to **37607** once to join

Is a person who takes pleasure in acting ethically more virtuous than a person who doesn't?

YES

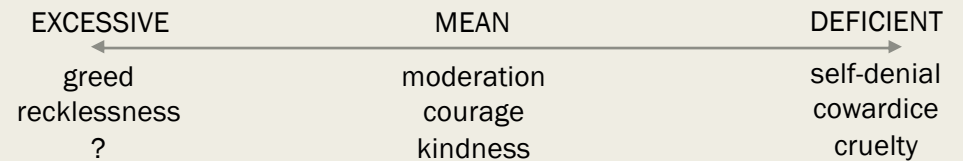
NO

Doctrine of the Mean



Bull images by Art Resource, NY; 2014 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

- “Virtue, then, is a mean, insofar as it aims at what is intermediate” (NE II.6 1106b)



- Compare with medicine
 - health in patient dependent on type of patient
 - treatment lies between extremes
- Or compare with art
 - beauty in art dependent on medium
 - can’t take anything away or add anything without damaging the art

Volition



- Importance of volition: action that's produced from within a person and which they are responsible for, i.e., not coerced or forced (*NE III.1 1110a*)
- Involuntary action (coercion or force) is an action that has an external principle, whereas voluntary action has a principle that's within the person
- Note that animals and children on this view have volition
- So further step: virtuous actions result from decision and deliberation (*NE III.2*)



Fulfilling our Function

- ✓ 1. Pleasure (*NE* II.3)
- ✓ 2. Doctrine of the mean (*NE* II.6)
- ✓ 3. Voluntary action (*NE* III.1–2)

+ practical wisdom (*phronēsis*; see *NE* VI.7)

“Further, our function is completed in accord with practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) and virtue of character. For virtue makes the target correct, and practical wisdom what furthers it” (*NE* VI.12).

Friendship in a Good Life

- “Friendship” (*philia*) covers a range of relationships
 - family relations
 - business relations
 - peer relations
 - etc.
- Three types of friendship
 - utility-friendships
 - pleasure-friendships
 - virtue-friendships

} self-serving

→ love another person for their own sake
(though you also get utility and pleasure)
- Connection between friendship and justice
 - consequences for politics

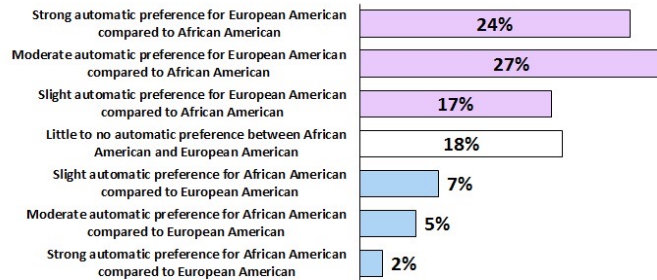


“We look brave,” said Frog.

“Yes, but are we?”

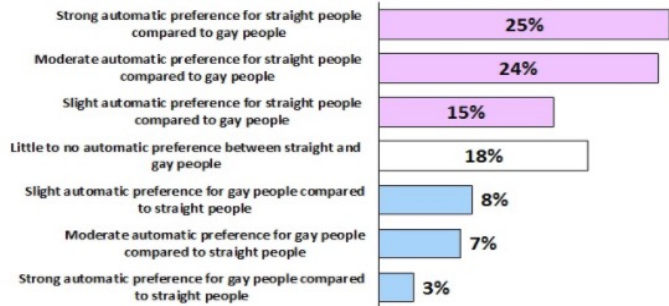
asked Toad.

Percent of web respondents with each score



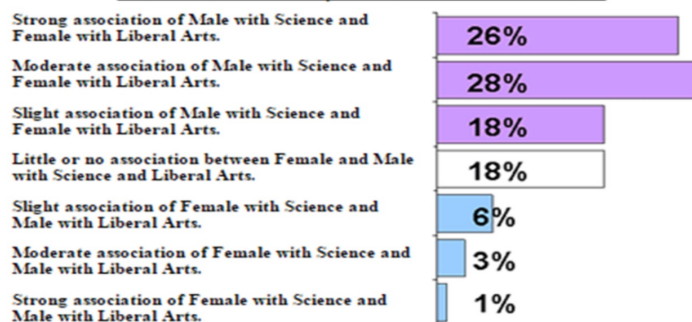
This distribution summarizes 3,314,277 IAT scores for the Race task completed between December 2002 and December 2015.

Percent of web respondents with each score



This distribution summarizes 1,425,486 IAT scores for the Sexuality task completed between April 2004 and December 2015.

Percent of web respondents with each score



RESULTS OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S IAT FOR GENDER AND SCIENCE. DATA IS FROM 299,298 TESTS TAKEN BETWEEN JULY 2000 AND MAY 2006.

Blindspots/Challenges

■ Aristotle's sexism

“A different form of friendship, however, is the one in accord with superiority—for example, of a father for his son, of older for younger generally, of man for woman, and of any sort of ruler for someone he rules” (*NE VIII.7*).

■ Aristotle's elitism

“For ruling and being ruled are not only necessary, they are also advantageous, and some things are set apart straight from birth, some to rule, others to be ruled” (*Politics I.5*).

■ Theoretical challenges for Aristotle's ethics

- the power of unconscious attitudes
- solutions?

- Recap
- Coming up
 - Live Like an Aristotelian week
 - Wednesday Breakout Sessions
 - Next Week's Midterm Debate:
Cancel Ancient Philosophy?